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# **Discipline, debt and coercive commodification: post-crisis neoliberalism and the welfare state in Ireland, the UK and the USA.**

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## **Abstract**

Ireland, the UK and the USA are heterogeneous examples of liberal worlds of welfare capitalism yet all three countries were deeply implicated in the 2008 global financial crisis. Examining these three countries together provides the opportunity to further develop an international comparative political economy of instability in the context of the globalised and financialised dimensions of Anglo-liberal capitalism and disciplinary governance. Our analysis is guided by the concept of disciplinary neoliberalism (Gill 1995) through which we explore: i) the dynamics that have shaped the impacts of and responses to the Great Recession; ii) the ways in which state market relations, shaped by differentiated accommodations to market imperative or market discipline, have been used as disciplinary tools and how these have interacted with existing social divisions and iii) the implications for shaping conditions for resistance. We suggest that the neoliberal pathways of each country, whilst not uniform, mark a 'step-change' and acceleration in the operation of disciplinary neoliberalism, and is particularly evident in what we identify as the coercive commodification of social policy.

**Key words:** Disciplinary neoliberalism; coercive commodification; post-crisis; welfare state; Anglo-liberal capitalism

## **Introduction**

Ireland, the UK and the USA are heterogeneous examples of liberal (Esping-Andersen 1990) or Anglo-liberal (Hay 2013) welfare capitalism, yet all three countries were deeply implicated in the financial crisis. Examining the countries together provides the opportunity to contribute to and further develop an international comparative political economy of instability in the

context of the globalised and financialised dimensions of Anglo-liberal capitalism and disciplinary governance. Our analysis, which is necessarily synoptic, is guided by the concept of disciplinary neoliberalism (Gill 1995; 2008; 2017) with a focus on conflict and resistance. We extend Gill's (1995) original exposition of the term to explore the disciplinary relations between state, market and society in Ireland, UK and the USA, representing political economies characterised by liberal welfare states, integration into increasingly complex global financial markets, excessive leverage and the expansion of individual credit and debt, as well as poor risk management and property bubbles (Kennett et al., 2013). These cases provide the opportunity to consider their exposure to the risks of Anglo-liberal capitalism, in the context of the increasing bifurcation between the domestic sphere and the international arena, with the former increasingly associated with debt, instability and fiscal burden, and the latter with wealth creation and wealth attribution (Seabrooke and Wigan, 2017). Exploring the relations between them also enables us to move the analysis beyond the conventional 'heartlands' of neoliberalism and extend it to include both core and peripheral positions within Anglo-liberal globalisation. The analysis will highlight the intersection of housing, work and welfare, as policy arenas which have not only been implicated in the pathways in and out of financial crisis in each country, but also in the ways in which debt and instability have been further embedded. Consequently, we argue that we are witnessing the reconfiguration of prevailing societal norms within Anglo-liberal capitalism. This involves the codification and institutionalisation of 'a concrete form of structural and behavioural power' both transnationally and locally (Gill 1995:411) and the embedding of the governance of instability, coercive commodification and disciplinary neoliberalism in the domestic sphere.

The article begins by establishing the theoretical and conceptual frame of disciplinary neoliberalism and links it to coercive commodification. Drawing on the work of Gill, we locate

and integrate it both within the wider context of financialisation and of social policy debates on commodification. Within this framework we go on to explore the neoliberal pathways of the three countries, the dynamics of financialisation and the implications for instability and resistance in the context of embedded coercive commodification. Whilst differences remain in the neoliberal pathways of each country, a 'step-change' and acceleration in the operation of disciplinary neoliberalism can be identified, and mediated in all three countries through coercive commodification and the housing-work-welfare nexus.

### **Disciplinary neoliberalism, financialisation and Anglo-liberal globalisation**

In utilising the concept of disciplinary neoliberalism we take up Gill's (1995) interpretation but re-position it in terms of the growth of financialisation in the two decades since his original assessment in the context of Anglo-liberal globalisation. This repositioning is in recognition not only of the ongoing resilience of neoliberalism but also of how global financial capital and financial market imperatives influence state-market relations and become intertwined with existing neoliberalising logics of competitiveness, marketisation and commodification. Gill examined the nature of disciplinary neoliberalism effected by the globalisation of neoliberal political economy in terms of two faces of power; one operating at a macro/transnational level and the other at a micro/local level. The first concerns the structural power of capital to impose discipline on public institutions and to make governments accountable to markets and the second is a form of behavioural power through which individuals are controlled and disciplined, which is micro and capillary in a Foucauldian sense. This chimes with the work of Seabrooke and Wigan (2017:2) who suggest a parallel process has taken place with the emergence of a 'notable disjuncture between territorially fixed fiscal and intrinsically fluid

financial systems'. They argue that the mobility of capital, and its ability to circumscribe the distribution of wealth through Global Wealth Chains, has created a schism between where value is created and the allocation of profits and wealth. This is a process supported by the state through governance and transactional complexity and codification, with differential 'sets of rules' applied to the domestic sphere and 'to the virtual sphere, or, more prosaically, to internationally mobile people, entities, and assets' (Seabrooke and Wigan, 2017:6).

The capacity to utilise wealth chains also varies between countries and reflects the hierarchical nature of the dimensions of power referred to by Gill, as well as the spatially differentiated and variegated forms of actually existing neoliberalism highlighted by Brenner et al (2010). Differences in the effects of disciplinary neoliberalism at a transnational level 'involve a hierarchy of pressures and constraints on government autonomy that vary according to the size, economic strength, form of state and civil society, and prevailing national and regional institutional capabilities, as well as the degree of integration into global capital and money markets' (Gill, 1995:415), with Ireland and the USA clearly situated at opposite ends of this spectrum.

At the micro level, the 'coercive face of the neoliberal state', Gill (1995:415) discusses a range of surveillance and panoptic techniques enabled by the collection of information used to discipline individuals via sanctions (workfare), the denial or provision of credit, health care and insurance. The disciplinary hierarchy at international level is mirrored by the uneven weight of the logic of disciplinary neoliberalism within countries and the embedding of coercive commodification which reproduces 'class, racial and gender hierarchies' (Gill and Roberts, 2011:162) in how individuals are integrated into the labour and other markets, and how the disciplining effects of debt (mortgage and other personal debt), low-wage work and coercive forms of social policy are experienced.

The concept of coercive commodification allows us to connect Gill's theoretical framework with the discipline of social policy and to open up the dynamics of disciplinary neoliberalism within the field of social policy practices. Previously mooted by Laws (2009) in discussions on the credit crunch, we suggest that further elaboration of the term resonates with how welfare states, and particularly liberal welfare states, have evolved under the rise, crisis and further entrenchment of disciplinary neoliberalism. In Esping-Andersen's (1990) work on de-commodification the emphasis was on the absence of compulsion. He argued that de-commodified welfare removes the element of compulsion from the way that individuals engage with the market and sell their labour, involving what Sandel (2005:123) refers to as an 'ideal of consent'. Subsequent work (see Pierson 2001), has focused on restructuring and re-commodification, as those aspects of welfare states that 'shelter workers from market pressures' (Pierson, 2001:422) have been dismantled. However, Pierson (2001) also identifies how, particularly in liberal welfare states, dismantling social security operates in tandem with the introduction of market buffers such as tax credits/in work benefits and the subsidisation of access to private housing. To be clear, these policy instruments do not detract from the shift back to commodification, but facilitate it by mediating market exposure. As Pierson (2001: 435) noted, 'the main political debate in the liberal welfare states has not focused on whether or not low-skilled workers should be in the labour market, but on the terms under which their participation should take place'.

As re-structuring has progressed under disciplinary neoliberalism, and driven by the way the power of capital and particularly financial capital has altered market imperatives, we argue that the state's role in commodifying welfare has become an increasingly coercive process. This reflects the exigencies of globalised, financialised and increasingly unstable neoliberalism as democratic states are being turned into 'debt collecting agencies on behalf

of a global oligarchy of investors' (Streeck, 2011:12). Contemporary welfare policy and practice is thus more aptly denoted as coercive commodification, encompassing an orbit that forges a nexus between housing, work and welfare; closing down any vestiges of choice and stripping back subsequent policy buffers, and locking people into a circuit of low paid work, debt and housing precarity.

Gill's original formulation of disciplinary neoliberalism and new constitutionalism referred to mechanisms of surveillance and systems of control which 'reduces the individual to a manipulable and relatively inert commodity' (Gill 1995:415-416). In this article we also want to draw out, on the contrary, how disciplinary neoliberalism and coercive commodification not only shapes the conditions for resistance but also drives conflict, reaction and contestation. We argue that as debt, instability and coercive commodification have further embedded and amplified disciplinary neoliberalism and repression post-crisis, this has also served to expose the financial hegemony of global institutions, assets and elites, and to open up new spaces of resistance at the global, national and local levels. The trajectories and variations in disciplinary neoliberalism and coercive commodification, as well as the dynamics of resistance will be discussed in the remainder of this article.

### **Paths in and out of financial crisis**

In political economy terms, the US and the UK are considered exemplars of Anglo-liberal capitalism and exhibit the key features of low taxation, low state expenditure, limited state intervention, free trade and high levels of market income inequality. Ireland shares some of these political-economic features but in a less overtly ideological polity. Structurally Ireland also occupies a peripheral position through the size of its economy and through what O'Hearn (2001) has outlined as its dependant position in the 'Atlantic economy' of the UK, USA and

Ireland. Thus, while the countries might display key features of Anglo-liberal capitalism and liberal welfare regime characteristics, amongst other differences they occupy unequal positions within that order, with the US and the UK at the core and drivers of that model and Ireland at the edge. However, at the core of this analysis the salience of what holds the Anglo-liberal countries together, namely, their pursuit of ‘policies that seek to accommodate market imperatives’ (Castles, 2010:636) remains; our concern is to track the dynamics and implications of this across diverse sites of disciplinary neoliberalism. Here we primarily use quantitative data to sketch the arc of financial crisis and crisis management across the three countries against longer term trends related to the rise of debt and inequality, and the privileging of capital over labour.

Within the context of Anglo-liberal political economies prior to the crisis economic growth had increasingly been sought through financial rather than productive capital. This was accompanied by a distributional shift from labour to capital and a diminished working-class agency in terms of its expression via organised labour. Drawing on Ó Riain’s (2012) method to calculate the growth of financialisation, Figure 1 demonstrates the share of profits within an economy going to financial activities in each country. We can see that this share, and by extension, the power of financial capital, rose dramatically in Ireland and the UK in the 2000s. The US had a steadier rise since the mid-1990s and the gap between financialisation in Europe and the US also narrowed over the 2000s reflecting the growth of financialisation in Europe, particularly in France and Germany, and the process of EU financial market integration (Macartney, 2010). However, prior to the crisis, by the mid-2000s, the UK and Ireland were swept up in a deeper shift to financialised accumulation, compared to Germany and France. In the post-crisis period, data available for the UK (but not, at the time of writing, for Ireland) reveals no sign of a retreat from financialised accumulation.



[Figure 1]

Therefore, while the financial sector in the US was at the root of the crisis, by this measure, the role of financialisation was greater in the UK and Irish contexts; a trend which is also reflected in the size of the financial sector relative to GDP and in the subsequent cost of bailing out the financial sector in each country, which we address later. It is also significant that the UK and Ireland are much more financially open than the USA and, as key financial services centres, facilitate the proliferation of global wealth chains. Both the UK and Ireland were and continue to be heavily implicated both as low-tax havens, that allow transnational corporations to sequester wealth (Seabrooke and Wigan, 2014; Gill, 2017), and as the on-shore shadow-banking hosts of EU securitisation (Clark, 2016), making them particularly sensitive to and compliant with the interests of international financial capital.

The financialisation of everyday life, expressed through the accumulation of household debt, is also a key feature of the Anglo-liberal experience, most particularly in Ireland which had the steepest increase in this measure in Europe over the 2000s. Strong increases were also apparent in the UK and the US prior to the crisis. As Figure 2 demonstrates household debt as a percentage of net disposable income increased substantially in all three counties, fuelled by easy credit, soaring house prices, stagnating incomes and a policy project of 'assetising' the working classes (Birch, 2015). This accumulation of household debt increased the vulnerability of the poorest sections of the working class in each country, a segment of the population which intersected with gender and ethnic inequalities in terms of who was exposed to unsustainable debt (Dymski, 2012).

[Figure 2]

While household debt increased, the share of national income going to workers through wages stagnated in the UK and declined in Ireland and the US, with Ireland being the more extreme example of decline (Figure 3). This trend obscures the fact that the distribution of income also became more uneven, a pattern which is most extreme and more volatile in the US (Figure 4). Volatility in the US context is however limited to 'redistribution' within the top 20% of the income distribution, with most losses in the top 1% being spread as gains to the top 10% (Dufour and Orhangazi, 2014).

[Figures 3 and 4]

At the other end of the spectrum, the US and the UK have historically had high incidences of low pay, measured as 'the share of full-time workers earning less than two-thirds of gross median earnings of all full-time workers' (OECD, 2017). This pattern has remained 'stable' at this high level since the 1980s, whilst (shorter term) trends for Ireland show that low pay rose substantially since the crisis (Figure 5). In 2014 (the year with the most recent comprehensive data coverage) Ireland ranked second highest in the OECD, the US third and the UK eight.

[Figure 5]

These trends, which are indicative of the particular trajectories of long term decline in the power of labour vis-à-vis capital in each country, have been mirrored by a decline in trade union density and the erosion of traditional forms of resistance and collective action; union

membership has at least halved in all three countries since the early 1980s (Figure 6). The US is clearly an outlier, while Ireland, which previously had relatively high levels in European terms has recently converged with the UK. The route to convergence comes from different configurations of state-union relations. In the UK unions have endured the legacy of hostility and weakened rights under Thatcherism, whilst Irish unions, fearing the punishment meted out to their UK counterparts (Mjøset, 1992), were incorporated into social partnership in 1987 until it collapsed in 2009. The disparity between public sector and private sector union membership is also striking. In Ireland in 2014, 62.6% of the public sector were unionised compared to 16.4% of private sector workers (Walsh, 2015), while figures for the UK are 52.7% and 13.4% respectively (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2017). Austerity, in the shape of a 15% reduction in the UK public sector workforce between 2010 and 2015 and increased use of outsourcing, has posed challenges for public sector organizational capacity. Provisions in the Trade Union Act 2016, including a higher threshold for lawful strike action, represent further attempts to demobilise trade unions in the UK (Bach, 2016). In the US, private sector union membership is practically non-existent at approximately 6.4%, whilst 34.4% of public sector workers are unionised (Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2017a). Yet long-term hostility to public sector unionism has meant the sector has been losing power, evident most notably by the lack of a right to strike across several states (Fox-Piven, 2015). The crisis presented another opportunity to weaken US public sector unions, with several states using it to weaken or abolish collective bargaining rights, under the mantle of privileged public sector workers as the root of states' fiscal crises (Crotty, 2012).

[Figure 6]

### **Bifurcated Anglo-liberal capitalism and 'back to the future'.**

Each country's financialised growth model temporarily unravelled into a full blown financial crisis of the late 2000s. From the perspective of disciplinary neoliberalism, what is significant is the scale of subsequent government intervention and the articulation of the bifurcation between the domestic sphere and the international arena in terms of who should bear the debt and fiscal responsibility, and in how neoliberalism's financial crisis-making conditions have been re-booted.

In their comparative analysis of systemic banking crises Laeven and Valencia (2012) show that of the countries experiencing such crises in the late 2000s, the US, Ireland, the UK and Nigeria were the only four countries to undertake the full range of state interventions: extensive liquidity support, significant guarantees on liabilities, restructuring costs, asset purchase and nationalisations. While the cost of those interventions added to the balance sheets in all countries, the overall cost varied depending on the size of the financial sector and the magnitude of each type of intervention used. Fiscal outlays were estimated to cost 40% of GDP in Ireland, 8.8% of GDP in the UK and 4.5% of GDP in the US (Laeven and Valencia 2012:28). In the EU context, reflecting the extent of their financialised economies, the UK and Ireland ranked first and second on the league table for costliest bank recapitalisations involving RBS, a UK bank and Anglo Irish Bank, an Irish bank, which respectively required €50bn and €32bn of public money (European Commission, nd).

In Ireland's case, its adoption of a blanket bank guarantee proved to be its downfall and cue for heavy market discipline, with long-term interest rates for Irish government bonds escalating to increasingly punitive levels, peaking at 9.6% in 2011. Despite adopting austerity measures as early as mid-2008, its banking sector turned out too big to rescue by the state

alone (Dukelow, 2015a). Market panic was also used as a disciplinary tool of the ECB, an institution which has become an agent of disciplinary neoliberalism in the way that is armed with 'increasing autonomous power to decide whether to create money and under which conditions to distribute it' (della Porta, 2017: 21). As such, there are traces of direct ECB coercion both at the time the bank guarantee was put in place and again at the point of entering a loan agreement with the Troika (Ó Riain, 2016). While Ireland was one of the debtor states disciplined by the ECB, the wider use of quantitative easing by the ECB, specifically credit easing by providing credit to the banking system, has on the other hand, been implemented in the spirit of restoring the financial sector to health and in the process benefiting private finance (Chang, 2013).

Meanwhile, the adoption of new fiscal governance rules under the fiscal compact institutionalises austerity within the EU in unison with the pressure exerted by financial capital (Gill, 2017). Public expenditure in the Eurozone and the rules with which Ireland must comply are subject to a new round of disciplinary neoliberalism and new constitutionalism via what Gill (2017) calls the strengthening of 'Financial Europe' over 'Social Europe'. The revised institutional architecture of EU monetary and fiscal governance 'lock in' disciplinary neoliberalism (Gill, 2017:639; and see Papadopoulos and Roumpakis, this issue). In the Irish case, this is not as disruptive a shift as that experienced by the Southern European states, where the dynamics of a 'technocratic neoliberal regime shift' (Jessop, 2015:94) have been in play (see also Papadopoulos and Roumpakis, this issue). As an already globalised and financialised economy, Ireland had turned to austerity prior to Troika conditionality and the reforms required by the Troika focused relatively more on financial restructuring than on welfare and labour market policy (Dukelow, 2015b). Moreover, the austerity driven welfare reforms that took place under Troika surveillance were not solely a matter of the imposition

of external discipline, to some extent the mantle of the Troika was a means of enabling and hastening domestically preferred reforms (Dukelow, 2015b; Hick, 2018).

Compared to Ireland, which had no control over monetary policy, nor the power to 'print' money to pay its debts, and which forced it to borrow according to the terms of private financial markets, the US and the UK had more latitude over monetary and fiscal policy. In the global hierarchy of disciplinary neoliberalism, both countries also had relatively greater power to 'prevent financial markets from dictating the terms of finance' (Kelton, 2015:36). However, in both cases use of monetary policy, specifically quantitative easing, was used to restore the financialised dynamics of the US and the UK economies, emboldening their banking systems in the process (Watkins, 2010). In the case of the US, its extensive use of quantitative easing until 2013 was used not only to increase the money supply, but also, as Bryan and Rafferty (2017) note, to maintain households as an 'asset class'. This strategy would safeguard securitised assets as revenue streams by ensuring that households are able to continue to meet their debt obligations. Thus, the US Fed used quantitative easing to buy up mortgage backed securities in a strategy used in tandem with expanding credit again to households as a way of re-financialising the economy post-crisis. However, the effect of this policy was to restore any losses that the wealthiest lost during the financial crisis and to re-inflate asset bubbles and associated risk taking. Racial disparities have also been a constant thread over the boom, bust and re-booting cycle of the US housing market, with Black and Hispanic people much more likely to have experienced restrictions in access to credit and high cost lending both pre- and post-crisis, whilst also being at much higher risk of foreclosure during the height of the financial crisis (Mahmud, 2012; Faber, 2017). A comparatively weaker deficit financed fiscal stimulus programme under the Recovery and Reinvestment Act 2009 had minor effects, with the recovery in employment and wages remaining subdued (Dufour

and Orhangazi, 2014). However, fiscal policy came under pressure by a mix of fiscal austerians, including conservative politicians and the growing power of the Tea Party, leading to a more decisive turn to austerity by 2013; despite the US having similar latitude in this domain without having to be overly fearful of financial market discipline.

The UK had similar latitude over monetary and fiscal policy, yet, like the US, quantitative easing has been used primarily to re-inflate the value of stock market assets and house prices. This has had similar effects to the pursuit of this policy in the US: 'widening inequality, stagnating real wages and a return to household indebtedness and potential financial fragility' (Kelton, 2015:39). While the UK was not part of the Eurozone and the Stability and Growth Pact, new constitutionalist rules were instituted by Labour under its fiscal policy adopted in 1997. Thus, two disciplinary parameters were applied to public borrowing; first, the 'golden rule' that borrowing would be for capital purposes only, and second, a 'stable investment rule' stipulating that total government debt would remain below 40% of GDP. While these rules were suspended in the early phase of the financial crisis, by 2010 the Fiscal Responsibility Act laid down rules for progressively reducing borrowing requirements as the crisis evolved. These rules were tightened under the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government in tandem with using similar disciplinary tactics as the ECB and resorting to the spectre of financial market panic and credit rating doom in the event of failure to reduce deficits (Sawyer, 2012). Following the logic of disciplinary neoliberalism, financial markets and financial capital were favoured under quantitative easing while fiscal policy was used as a tool to further erode the already weakened protective effects of the UK welfare state and to deepen the effects of debt and discipline on welfare subjects.

### **Embedding coercive commodification and disciplinary neoliberalism**

Whilst monetary and fiscal policy were used to rescue and re-inflate financialised capital, at the micro level, the logics of disciplinary neoliberalism have embedded the policy and practice of coercive commodification. Yet variegated patterns exist here too. As 'heartlands' of neoliberalism, combined with the fact that the US and the UK also share long histories of 'illiberal' social policy (King, 1999), both country's recent evolution of coercive commodification embed already existing regimes. The Irish case represents a more novice turn, following the severity of its recent phase of disciplinary neoliberalism, which has reduced its capacity to implement compensatory social policies that tended to exist alongside a more explicitly neoliberalised economic regime. Nonetheless, in each case, the intersecting evolution of housing, work and welfare policies erode both choices and buffers, and 'lock in' coercive commodification. As social safety nets evolve in more punitive ways, an emerging opposite effect is the 'lock out' of marginalised individuals from access to decent work, welfare or housing that protects them from destitution.

Accordingly, in the US, the shift to austerity by 2013 builds on a much longer trajectory of coercive commodification. The decisive turn occurred two decades earlier with the introduction of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (1996) under a confluence of neoliberal and conservative influences (Waddan, 2015). The punitive workfare measures and restricted eligibility associated with Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF), instituted under the Act, has meant that the long-term trend has been declining numbers in receipt of TANF (Tach and Edin, 2017). Nevertheless, under recent austerity funding for TANF tightened and tougher sanctions were implemented across several states (Tach and Edin, 2017). The severity of this level of coercive commodification has meant that a growing number of people are effectively 'locked out'; people not in employment and not eligible for aid has given rise to the 'discovery' of extreme poverty in the US, measured by metrics used



to calculate poverty in the developing world, that is living on \$2 or less per day (Edin and Schafer 2015 in Tach and Edin, 2017). In contrast, the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), designed to support low-paid work has had a 'meteoric rise' (Hacker, 2016:778) since its introduction in the 1970s. However, the extent to which it buffers workers, rather than simply coercing them into low paid work in the absence of out-of-work welfare for those without social security, and thus sustaining the sizeable low-wage sector in the US economy, is questionable. The historically high level of low paid work in US has not declined over time (see Figure 5 and earlier discussion) and the intersecting problem of in-work poverty is one which disproportionately affects women, and Black and Hispanic people (Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2017b). Tax expenditures supporting the working poor also pale in comparison to the cost of tax expenditures accruing to the wealthiest workers (Hacker, 2016). The evolution of supports for housing tracks a similar divide. Not all households were borne up by the policy of using quantitative easing to maintain their assetised status, those deemed less credit-worthy and who are without access to credit and without housing equity post-crisis are the direct targets of disciplinary neoliberalism via cuts to housing assistance, another discretionary item of expenditure states could cut as austerity took hold (Goering and Whitehead, 2017). This builds upon a long-term shift towards the commodification of housing supports, from public provision, which has effectively disappeared in the US, to support in the private rental market (Hanlon, 2017). However, this support is also divided by those who work and don't work, with more support for affordable housing channelled to low-paid workers via the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) than it is to the unemployed/lowest income families. Yet, the effectiveness of the LIHTC as a market buffer is also questionable given that almost half of all renter households count as rent burdened (Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, 2017).

Similarly, in the UK, whilst the erosion of the benefit system can be traced to the mid-1980s, the more decisive turn to coercive commodification occurred under New Labour from 1997. This involved the introduction of new conditions and tools to survey claimants' efforts to progress to work. However, these measures were also combined with market buffers; following the US example of EITC, Working Families Tax Credit was introduced in 1999 (Clegg, 2015). Since the 2010s the coercive commodification of the system has intensified, targeting not only those outside the labour market, but also those in insecure, low-paid employment. Fletcher and Wright (2017) identify increased use of strategies of surveillance, sanction, and deterrence. In particular, sanction rates have escalated, imposed on one quarter of Jobseeker Allowance recipients between 2010 and 2015. And, as the Universal Credit system is being rolled out, replacing a range of separate tax credits, emerging data on sanction rates are demonstrating even higher rates (Webster, 2017 in Fletcher and Wright, 2017).

Changes in the social security system intersect with the coercive commodification of the social housing system, loading risk and insecurity on those who depend on public housing support. The security of social housing tenure has been diminished, fuelled not only by budgetary constraints but also the view that social housing for life encourages dependency and 'worklessness' (Murie and Williams, 2015). The Localism Act 2011 enables local authorities to prioritise the allocation of social housing tenancies to working people, and to bring social housing tenancies closer to conditions in the private rented sector by setting rents at up to 80% of market levels and stipulating fixed terms rather than life-time tenancy. And, tracking the longer-term reliance on the private rental sector in the US, those in housing need are increasingly channelled into the private rental sector, whilst a series of stricter limits have been placed on eligibility rules and on the value of Housing Benefit. Assistance for unemployed people with a high housing debt burden has also tightened with the conversion

of a mortgage interest payment grant with a loan system (Tunstall, 2016). On the other hand, the Help to Buy scheme, introduced in 2013, succeeded in assisting the more financially privileged to purchase housing, and chimes with the monetary policy project of re-financialising the economy post-crisis.

In contrast to the longer, albeit deepening, regimes of coercive commodification in the US and the UK, Ireland's more novice experience with coercive commodification began with a framing of the social protection system that was 'overly generous and poorly policed' (NESC, 2011: 2) early in Ireland's crisis. The key components of Ireland's turn towards coercive commodification include the institutionalisation of a stricter benefit regime, eroding the duration of insurance payments and tightening eligibility (which particularly impacted young people and lone parents); and the introduction of more coercive labour market programmes coupled with the increasing use of disciplinary surveillance techniques and sanctions. This is reflected in the legalisation and codification of coercive commodification through the Social Welfare Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2010 which introduced penalty rates, and its further embedding in the 2013 Social Welfare Act which goes as far as disqualification from a payment for nine weeks for individuals who continually fail to comply.

Since their introduction, the limited nature of data publicly available shows that the total number of penalty rates applied to those in receipt of Jobseeker payments has increased from 359 in 2011 to 10, 867 in 2016; the application of sanctions thus continues to increase even after levels of unemployment began to subside from 2012, although it does not reach anything like the level of sanctions applied in the UK (Dukelow and Heins, 2017). Plans are afoot to bring more people into the system with the intent of helping to 'ensure a supply of labour at competitive rates and to minimise welfare dependency' (Government of Ireland, 2016:14). Whilst some new in work benefits are being introduced, their ability to buffer

market pressures in the context of Ireland's flexible labour market and high incidence of low pay remains to be seen.

To compound this, low income households feature prominently in the escalating number of homeless families since the mid-2010s. Tracking the UK and the US, increasingly those in housing need are required to meet that need through the private market, with Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) assistance. Housing risk is thus transferred to individuals, who are vulnerable to eviction in the context of limits to HAP, ineffective attempts to regulate rising rents, and housing shortage; demonstrating a 'lock out' effect of coercive commodification. For homeowners in mortgage distress, which has also escalated post-crisis, very limited forms of debt relief mean that this group is also 'locked in' to coercive commodification, moderated only by a policy of bank forbearance, put in place in part to protect the capital base of the banks (Waldron and Redmond, 2014).

### **Instability, resistance and disciplinary neoliberalism**

Having drawn out the dynamics, processes and practices of disciplinary relations between state, market and society in Ireland, the UK and the USA, and the deepening emphasis on coercive commodification post-crisis in previous sections of this article, we now turn to consider the implications for resistance and contestation. Far from disciplinary neoliberalism and new constitutionalism reducing individuals to manipulable and inert subjects, it is the very contradictions and negative consequences on conditions of everyday life that have opened up new spaces for resistance and revolt.

In the context of financialised neoliberalism and coercive commodification strategies and mechanisms for resistance have become more constrained. As traditional avenues for protest and collective action have been eroded, the power of labour vis-à-vis capital

diminished, and the 'protective' capacity of the welfare state diminished, coercion, debt and instability have become more deeply embedded in peoples' everyday life. Hartmann and Honneth (2006:51) suggest a process of 'social desolidarisation' has taken place. They see this as an effect of the transformation of social rights into 'economised social services' and the remoralisation and paternalisation of entitlements and welfare provision. Solidarity can also be seen to be increasingly diffuse and divisive as the bifurcated and multi-scalar nature of financialised capital and global wealth chains blurs the dynamics of oppression and inequality, whilst diverse interpretations of the causes of the global financial crisis has given rise to the articulation of demands emanating from a wide range of voices from across the political spectrum.

However, the exposure of the drivers of the global economic crisis, the institutional responses, combined with the diverging fortunes of capital and labour post-crisis has brought into sharper focus the deepening contradictions of financialised capitalism, and its embedding in everyday life through instruments of coercive commodification. Whilst disciplinary neoliberalism attempts to shrink the space and opportunity for resistance, it is also a driver of conflict between classes, cultures and lifestyles, and political groupings, generating macro and micro level revolt against global elites and institutions, as well as localised responses to and protest against single issue campaigns. In all three countries both traditional and new social movements have given voice to alternate narratives of 'austerity capitalism'; for example the Occupy Movement, the Scottish Nationalist Party, and Jeremy Corbyn, elected as the UK Labour Party leader and making substantial inroads into the Conservative majority in the 2017 election, as well as the growth of a larger but still typically fragmented Left in Ireland. The intensification of disciplinary neoliberalism in relation to both labour and the welfare state has been accompanied by Anti-Austerity marches in all three countries, as well

as public sector protests in both UK and the USA, and a large and sustained anti-water charge movement in Ireland which is now embracing a wider range of social issues. There has also been an increasing dissatisfaction with the 'European project', EU institutions, technocrats and political elite, the rise of anti-EU sentiment, and a sense of policy failure and diminishing vertical and horizontal solidarity between EU institutions, members states and citizens, particularly in the UK, but rather more muted in Ireland. This has given rise to increasing support for political parties that are explicitly opposed to membership of the EU, as well as the increased risk of social unrest amongst the countries of the EU, which the ILO (2013:14) attributes to the 'policy responses to the ongoing sovereign debt crisis and their impacts on people's lives and perceptions of well-being'.

The UK's narrow vote to leave the EU by 2019, following the UK EU referendum in June 2016, highlighted deep anti-establishment dissatisfaction, as did the election of Donald Trump in the USA in the same year. Whilst there is no simple explanation for the Brexit vote in the UK or the narrow victory of Donald Trump in the USA, both can be associated with increasing distrust and disjuncture between international institutions, domestic political elites, and the erosion of public services, and particularly to the increasingly obvious bifurcated and exploitative nature of Anglo-liberal globalisation. In the USA, this dissatisfaction was fuelled by concerns regarding the Clinton Legacy, and the Alt-Right wing agenda which remains prominent. The irony is that since the election of Donald Trump shares in the biggest US banks have risen, as Trump is viewed as committed to reviewing financial regulation and sweeping away restrictions. Moreover, several Goldman Sachs alumni have secured senior jobs in the Trump Administration (Financial Times, 2017), which suggests far from a radical reappraisal of the disciplinary relations between state, market and society it is the further strengthening and embedding of the structural and behavioural power of capital

and the state. Whilst the bar has been raised for movements of resistance and working-class insurgency, the increase in acts of resistance, particularly in higher income countries and the increasingly 'unreasonable demands, discipline or insecurity' (Hartmann and Honneth 2006:49) being experienced by households in all three countries suggests a strengthening of insurgency and resistance to disciplinary neoliberalism.

## **Conclusion**

Whilst differences remain between the three Anglo-liberal political economies of the UK, the USA and Ireland this article has sought to draw out a comparative political economy in the context of financialised capitalism and disciplinary neoliberalism. Drawing on and further developing the work of Gill (1995) the article highlights the increasing disjuncture between the international arena of capital mobility, wealth creation and wealth attribution, and the domestic sphere, increasingly associated with debt, instability and fiscal responsibility. These changes represent a reconfiguration of and step-change in the prevailing societal norms in each of the countries as processes contributing to a deepening of disciplinary neoliberalism and coercive commodification through which people are 'locked-in' to a circuit of insecurity and debt.

The dynamics of struggle and conflict - in the context of the shrinking of 'spaces of resistance', falling real wages, declining union membership, and coercive commodification – emerge in the crosshairs of capitals contradictions which are becoming ever more apparent, and are expressed and articulated through macro and micro forms of protest, alternative narratives and contested politics. The current mode of capitalist development across all three countries in this study is relying on the deregulation of 'the social', and the embedding of coercion, instability and debt in everyday life mediated by the state, for its successful

implementation. However, it is these very dynamics through which forms of protest are emerging to destabilise, disrupt and disturb contemporary capitalism and with the potential to shape its future trajectory.

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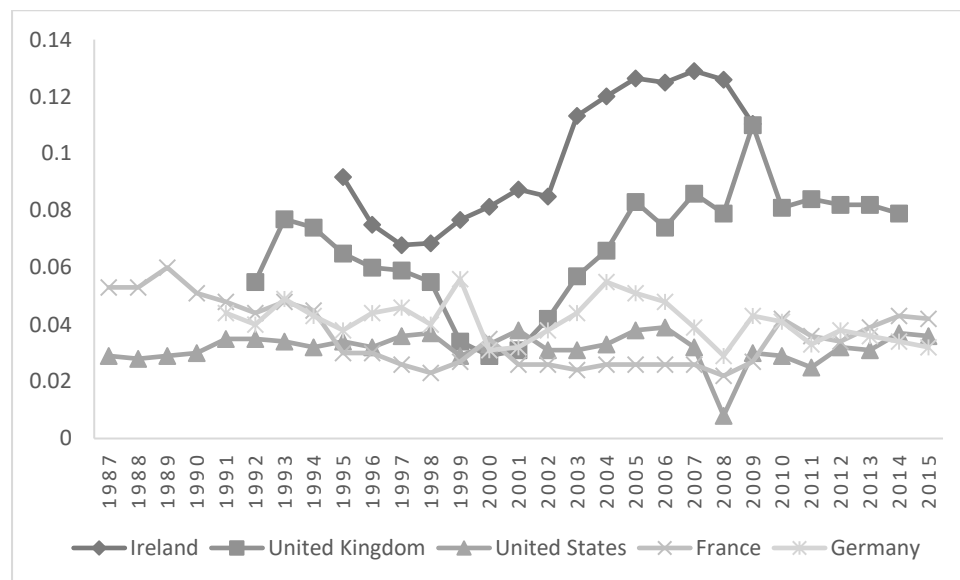
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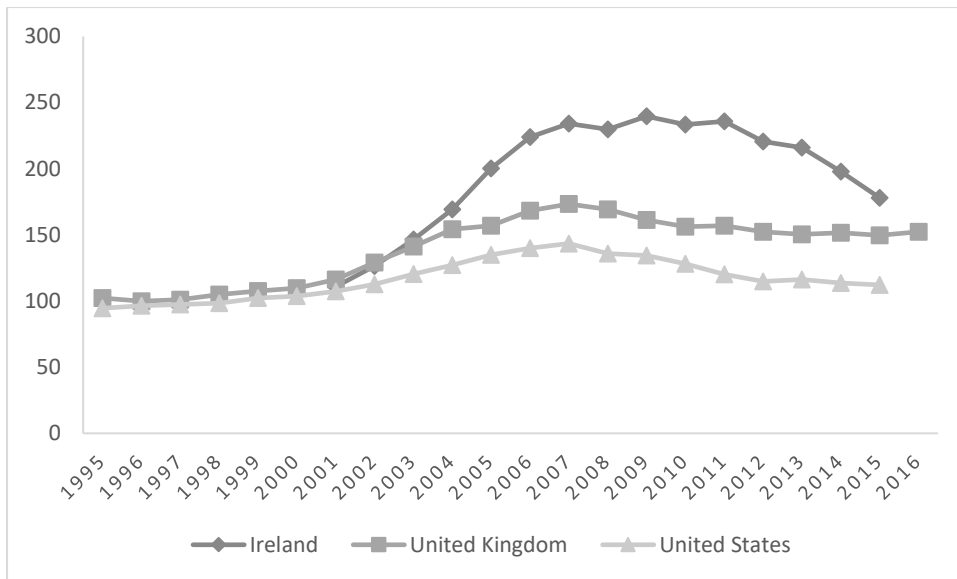
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**Figure 1: Proportion of all corporate profits going to financial intermediation 1987–2015**



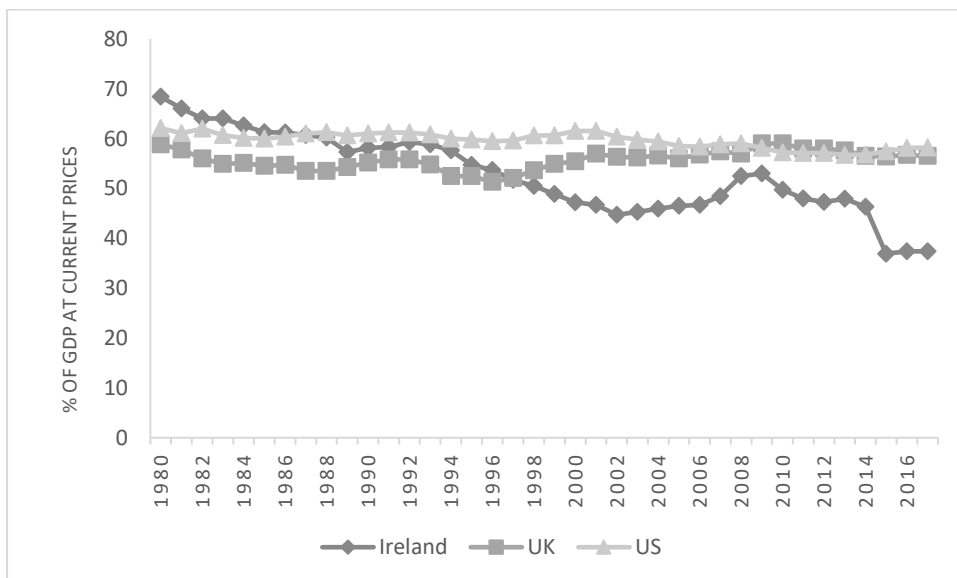
Source: OECD STAN database (data for Ireland from older STAN dataset (ISIC Rev 4, SNA93))

**Figure 2 Household Debt as % of net disposable income 1995-2016**



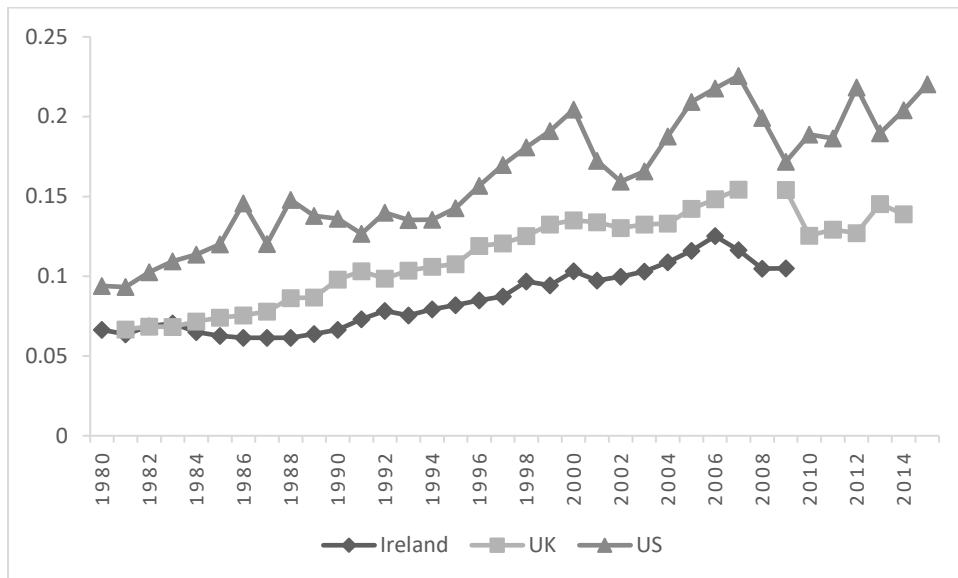
Source: OECD.Stat

**Figure 3: Wage share 1980-2017**



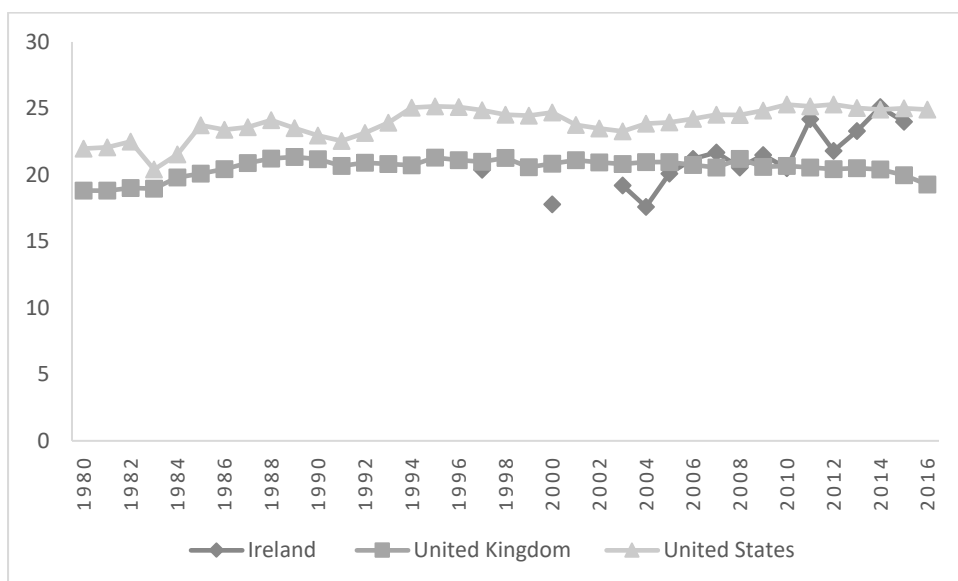
Source: AMECO Database

**Figure 4: Top 1% income share 1980-2015**



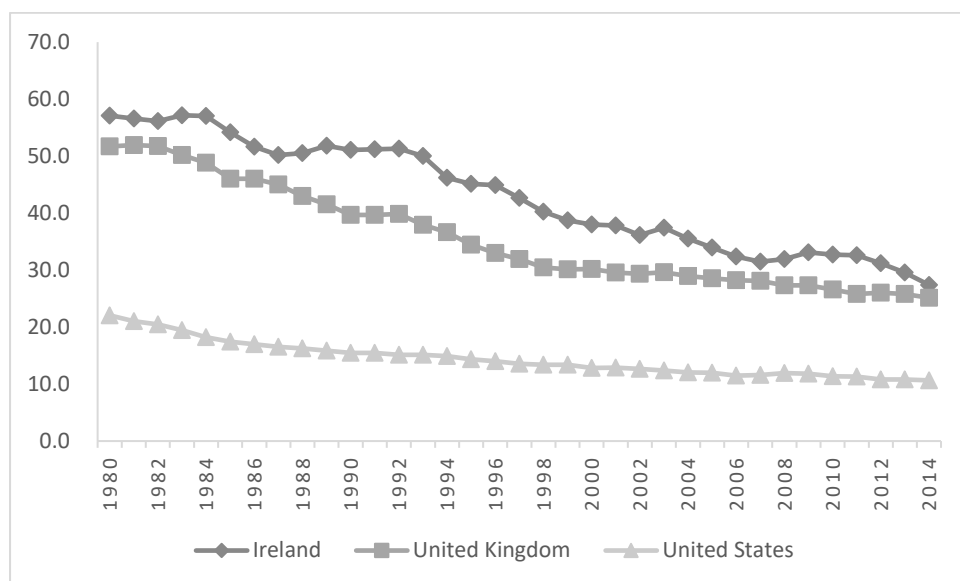
Source: World Wealth and Income database

**Figure 5: Incidence of low pay 1980–2016**



Source: OECD.Stat

**Figure 6: Trade Union Density 1980-2014**



Source: OECD.Stat



